

Finnish-Croatian Diplomatic Relations 25 Years

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Finland recognized the independence of Croatia on 17 January 1992. Diplomatic relations were established one month later, on 19 February 1992. As Finland's first ambassador to the new republic I presented my credentials to President Franjo Tudjman in Zagreb on a sunny autumn day of 29 September 1992. My permanent residence was in Budapest, Hungary and therefore Zagreb became a side accreditation.

Croatia had declared its independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991. The government in Belgrade responded to this by declaring secession illegal and in July the federal forces - that is Serb-led army - started their advance on Dalmatian coastal areas and the military conflict began. As the war progressed several important cities and one third of the Croatian territory came under attack by the Yugoslav forces.

I had started as ambassador in Budapest in August 1992. To Budapest I moved from neighboring Austria where I had worked as Finland's CSCE ambassador in 1989-1992. From these two Yugoslav's neighbors, Austria and Hungary I followed closely not only the fall of the communist system in Europe, but also the escalation of the Balkan conflict from its earliest days.

My term as ambassador to Croatia ended four years later, in April 1996. Peace had returned to the war-torn country in autumn 1995, but the memories of the bloody civil war were still fresh. The war had caused great damage to Croatia's key economic assets: tourism, transit traffic and investments. GDP growth was negative and hundreds of thousands refugees were on the move. I don't exaggerate when I say that my whole ambassador assignment in Croatia was overshadowed by the war, destruction and human suffering.

I was the first Finnish ambassador to the newly independent Croatia but I was not the first Finnish ambassador to historical Croatia. I had had a predecessor. During the 2nd World War the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia in 1941 had allowed the Croatian radical right to come into power, join the Axis and form the "Independent State of Croatia"/NDH. Finland didn't sign the Axis Tripartite Pact but diplomatic relations with Croatia were established. Ambassador Onni Talas, accredited from Rome, served as Finland's ambassador to Croatia from April 1941 to 1942. Ambassador Talas was followed by Counsellor Armas Yöntilä as chargé d'affaires from 1942 until November 1944. After the war, from 1946 until the disintegration of

Yugoslavia in 1991, the Finnish interests in the Croatian part of Yugoslavia were followed from the embassy in Belgrade.

We diplomats move from one country to another. Some countries have less, some more meaning to us personally. Some are just stop-overs in the career while some others leave permanent marks upon us and remain unforgettable. Croatia for me belongs to the second category. I will always remember Croatia and my years there. Not because of its beautiful sea coast, the Adriatic islands or the natural inland beauty - all of which I surely learnt to like - but because professionally, as a diplomat and a student of history - I have an exceptionally deep and close contact with Central Europe, the Balkans and Croatia.

I came to know the country and the Yugoslav diplomats already in the early 1970's. Together with seven other European neutral and non-aligned countries Finland and Yugoslavia became during the Cold War mediators between east and west in the Helsinki process. These historic negotiations led to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. and finally to the fall of the Iron Curtain. From the earliest years of the NNA-cooperation in 1972 in Dipoli Finland, until the year 1992 when the NNA-group disintegrated - altogether some 20 years - I worked in close contact with Yugoslav diplomats, many of them Croats, participated in NNA meetings in various places in Yugoslavia, including Split and the island of Brioni. Lifelong friendships were created over the ethnic lines.

When the hostilities between the Serb-led Yugoslav People's Army and Slovenian police started near Austrian-Slovenian border in June 1991 I was in Vienna, just some 200 kilometers away. "The Western Balkans conflict" became a permanent item on the agenda of our conference and we sensed the ethnic tensions inside the Yugoslav CSCE delegation, too.

When I then moved from Austria to neighboring Hungary in summer 1992 an all-out war in Croatia had ceased temporarily thanks to the intervention of the UN, but fighting had devastated the country. Croatia was effectively partitioned and almost a third of its territory was under Serb control. Sporadic attacks and intrusions continued and tensions were high.

As Finland didn't have a diplomatic office of its own in Zagreb before 1997, the premises of the Swedish embassy were kindly opened to us. My task was facilitated also by the presence of the Finnish UN/UNPROFOR Battalion and its helpful officers. Soon I found an excellent candidate for the post of Finland's first Honorary Consul. Mr. Branimir Vlajo, who still is our loyal and energetic consul in Zagreb and became my number one partner. Honorary consulates were opened in Rijeka and Split, too. Experience and knowledge of these new Consuls were of particular importance during the first years of Finnish-Croatian relations as I could come to Zagreb and other main cities at certain given intervals only.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In spite of the war and tension the new Finnish ambassador was warmly received in Zagreb. Meetings with ministers and leading civil servants were swiftly organized. Welcome was warm even on the highest level. My meetings with President Franjo Tudjman have left an indelible mark on me. Ambassadors do not automatically get access to the heads of state, side-accredited ambassadors even less. Franjo Tudjman, however seemed always to have time for Finland's ambassador.

My first meeting with the President was in September 1992 when I handed over my credentials letter in his Palace - formerly known as Villa Zagorja, president Tito's former residence - situated on the beautiful outskirts hills of Zagreb. Later on when I came from Hungary to Croatia, I found the Palace doors always open. I often wondered why the relatively morose and withdrawn President Tudjman always had time for an ambassador from a small north European country. I found the explanation in President's own words.

Franjo Tudjman kept up a genuine interest in Finland. As historian he knew much about our past, as soldier he knew much about our wars. This former partisan and the youngest general in the Yugoslav Army spoke with great admiration of Finland and our achievements. He always started our conversation with reference to General Mannerheim whom he seemed to respect highly. He spoke about the Winter War and underlined the justified freedom fight of nation states. I remember him saying how similar Finland and Croatia were in many ways: both small in size, five million people facing a bigger and unpredictable neighbor. Croatia is a border land between Central Europe and the Balkans. Croatia lies also on cultural and religious border. The fate of a borderland is often to be trampled and marched over, colonized, defended and abandoned in turn by stronger neighbors. At this point, Tudjman raised his finger and said forcefully: "Ambassador, remember that Croatia is not part of the Balkans. Croatia is part of Western Europe". And I must say that when listening to him I found, indeed, many similarities between these two countries.

Tudjman, a prominent communist until the 1960s when he embraced Croatian nationalism and went to jail for his belief, was particularly interested in hearing of the Finnish-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But of course the bulk of our meetings was spent on the regional conflict in former Yugoslavia and Croatia's future. Tudjman was confident that Serbian nationalism would wreak havoc on Croatian soil. He was a devoted patriot and nationalist but for him the "greater Serbian nationalism" - as he put it - and the Croatian nationalism didn't compare.

The president had expected Croatia to get more support from the West during the war. As this didn't materialize the way he wished, he felt betrayed. He began to lecture the Americans, the European Union and the United Nations about their toothless presence in the territory of Croatia. He was outspoken and ruthless in his criticism against the UN, criticism which he obviously wanted the ambassador to convey to his own government. Tudjman was a man of hard measures, stern and serious. I don't remember having seen a smile on his face. He didn't want the international military presence just to freeze the situation on the ground. He wanted

the international presence to seal the Croatian gains and reverse the gains of the adversary.

For Tudjman the Bosnian solution was the key to Yugoslav's succession. At one of our meetings he drew with his pencil Balkan border lines on a piece of paper and spoke openly about partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The international community applied much pressure on Tudjman to get him to change his Bosnia policy. This didn't succeed before spring 1994 when the President finally agreed to form a Croat-Muslim federation in Bosnia.

Franco Tudjman was a controversial and disputed man, not only outside the borders of his own country. In the eyes and minds of many foreign observers he was guilty of war crimes and Carla de Ponte, the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) prosecutor has said that she should have indicted Franjo Tudjman had the President not died in 1999. But for most Croats, and this is the case even today, Tudjman was "the father of their country" for his role in achieving Croatian independence. His legacy is still strong. In 2015 the Zagreb Airport was renamed after Tudjman and supported by some 70% of Croats.

Dear friends,

Yes, my Ambassador years in Croatia were war years, darksome and not easy. The war had ruined the economy which had been the richest of Yugoslav's six republics. Pipelines, refineries, power stations and water supplies had been blown up. The motorway from Zagreb to Belgrade was cut and hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons were on the move. But - a new Croatia was born and we both, Finns and Croats, we both wanted to pave the way for more peaceful times and enhanced contacts. Permanent embassies were opened in both countries, led by skillful professionals such as Ambassador Kresimir Kopic in Helsinki and Ambassador Timo Rajakangas in Zagreb now, as well as their predecessors. I already mentioned the important role of our Honorary Consuls in promoting the economic and cultural contacts. Thanks to active, devoted and innovative persons such as Telle and Pekka Salminen and others, Croatia found in Finland a solid powerbase of true friends.

After the war the economy started to grow at 4-5% annually. Incomes doubled and economic and social opportunities improved. The European economic crisis hit Croatia badly, but as the groundwork for a revival of Finnish-Croatian contacts was solid from the pre-war years our bilateral co-operation started to grow. There was one special area where Finnish-Croatian co-operation had long-standing traditions. That area was shipbuilding, the stronghold of Croatian engineering skills. Today Croatia is the second largest shipbuilding nation in Europe. Modern Finnish ferries were constructed in Croatian shipyards in the 1970-1980s. The story continues but now also other forms of industrial cooperation - e.g. in forestry and clean technology - are developing. Our bilateral trade is around 50 million euros, direct flights link Finland and Croatia and the Finnish tourists have returned to the Adriatic in tens of thousands.

Finland was active in preparing Croatia for its EU membership. Our support was more than just political. Twinning cooperation in good governance, administration, education, gender equality and other key sectors have been part of this portfolio. I participated in President Halonen's official visit to Croatia in 2009 and I accompanied Foreign Minister Stubb on his visit in 2010. As Political Director and later on as the Secretary of State of the Finnish Foreign Ministry I have paid many separate visits to the country. Two Croatian Presidents, Stjepan Mesic in 2003 and Ivo Josipovic in 2011 visited Finland. Intensive exchange has continued on Governmental and Parliamentary level.

In July 2013 I had the privilege to represent the Finnish Government at the joyous celebration festivities when Croatia joined the EU as its 28th member and as second of the seven ex-Yugoslav states. Thousands of Croatians lined the streets of sunny Zagreb on that day which for them was an important milestone in country's history. Satisfaction and joy was genuine inside myself, too. I had been able to attend and assist in the re-awakening of this proud European nation from the ashes of a brutal conflict into peace and normal life. Zagreb today with its imposing parks and squares, blooming magnolias and smiling people is a different city from the war years of the 1990s. It is a lively and beautiful, green European metropole. On my visits inside the country I sense the same positive mood. I personally would like to see Croatia in a bridge-builder's role in the Balkans where feeling of mistrust and suspicion among the parties still persists.

May peace and optimism prevail in Croatia and may the Finnish-Croatian co-operation bloom!

Thank you.